

# Problem Classmarks

## Solution to the bespoke classification scheme at the University of Sussex Library

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### ABSTRACT

The library of the University of Sussex uses a modified version of the Library of Congress Classification (LC) to shelf its collection in the public reading rooms. For some subjects entirely in-house schemes were designed using the same first-level class letter(s) as LC. These modifications are now problematic and necessitated a large scale reclassification to standard LC. This article describes the methodologies and workflows employed to reclassify and merge approximately 57,500 books between 2017 and 2023.

**KEYWORDS** reclassification; Library of Congress Classification; book move; bespoke classification

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### Introduction

The University of Sussex was founded in 1961. The library building opened in 1964 and within the first three years of operation had a collection of 80,000 volumes, increased to 250,000 within ten years of opening. Book acquisition included significant gift book collections from individuals ([Daiches, 1970](#): 9, 158, 160-161; [Inglis, 2011](#):75).

Librarians originally adopted the Library of Congress classification scheme (LC) and then librarians devised their own modified LC for certain subjects ([Daiches, 1970](#):158; [Goddard and Hailay, 2017](#):21). For some subjects, wholly in-house schemes were designed using the same first-level class letter as LC. For example, English Literature was assigned PF and based on the date of birth of the author:

William Blake (1757-1827) = PF 75700/04

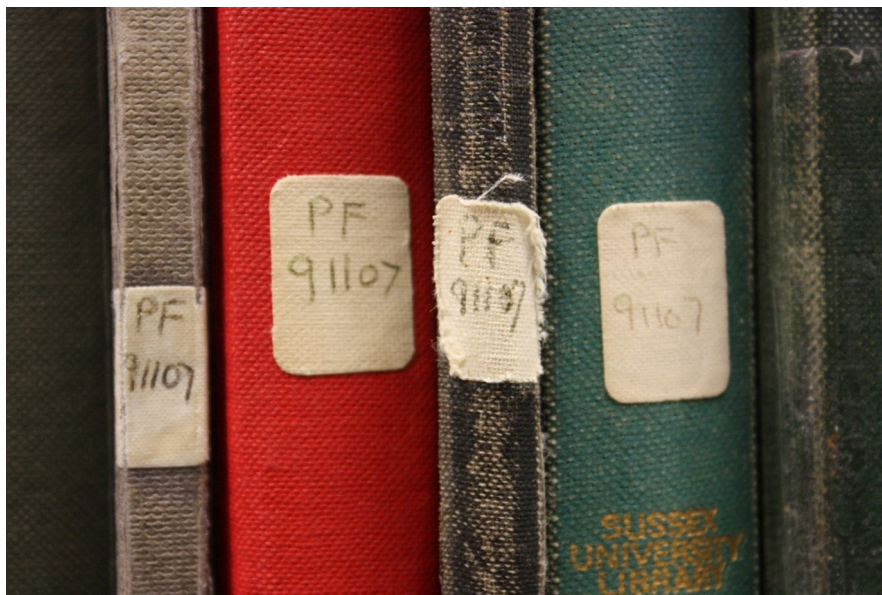
Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) = PF 85400/01

Mervyn Peake (1911-1968) = PF 91107 (see [Figure 1](#) and [2](#))

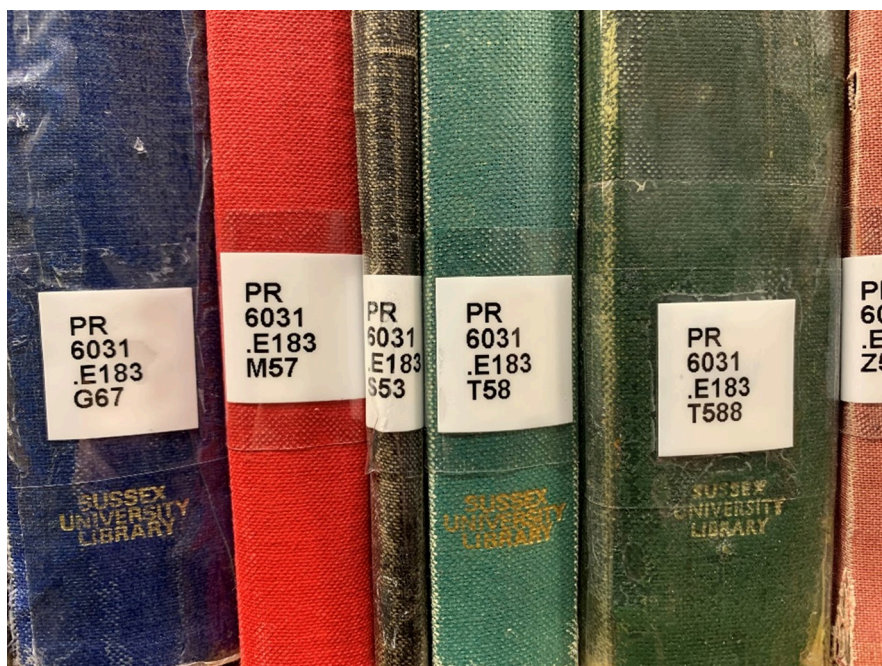
Hillary Mantel (1952 -) = PF 95218

Linton Kwesi Johnson (1952 -) = PF 95219

As Goddard and Haillay have explained, for authors born post-2000, this system fails without modification ([2017:21](#)). It was thus decided a reclassification project was required to conform to LC. In 2017, the University of Sussex Library reclassified and moved approximately 10,500 German and Scandinavian literature books from PK to PT; in 2019, we reclassified and moved 12,000 American Literature books from PH to PS. In 2023, we reclassified the 25,000 books contained in the English Literature collection in classmark PF and merged it with the 10,000 items in PR. This move-and-merge is the subject of this article.



**Figure 1:** Mervyn Peake original PF classmark



**Figure 2:** Mervyn Peake new PR classmark

Following recent email exchanges with retired staff, it has been established that when the Library was founded, it did implement English Literature LC correctly, and then moved to the in-house, improved, classmark scheme including English Literature. As Adrian Peasgood and Cherry Horwill suggest:

Adrian [Peasgood, started Aug 1962] used LC's PR for the first few months of his appointment, and this made him think we could do better for our readers. He got an OK to create PF, assuring Alec Blamire (then i/c cat'n/class) that it would contain capacity for everything in LC's PR. Overseas Englishes were to be accommodated in PF extended by a range of third letter extensions. This certainly happened for a while, until, we think as part of one of the initial abortive reclassification schemes for the literatures (? by the mid-1980s), LC's PR was used for the overseas Englishes. ([Horwill and Peasgood, 2023](#)).

## Literature Review

Before we started the project, we considered what other libraries had accomplished and the challenges of managing a large-scale move of our Literature collection. Libraries move books for a variety of reasons, and as Atkins and Teper ([2011:60-61](#)) suggest, this could be a temporary or permanent move. The type of book move required will determine its particular characteristics; however, there are many common factors. For example, Atikin and Teper ([2011:74](#)) identify thorough planning as essential; Meltzer ([1993:559](#)) suggests communication with users and staff is crucial; and Weaver and Stanning ([2002:68](#)) suggests that advance and after-completion publicity is a priority. A timeline of start, finish and other milestone achievements can also help ([Atkins and Teper, 2011:76](#)). Exactly when to move is also a consideration for academic libraries: Cash ([2001:18-19](#)) identifies the summer vacation as the ideal time, noting, however, that this may depend on local circumstances. Likewise, there is discussion about the best use of staff and whether using library or temporary staff is appropriate ([Cash, 2001:23](#); [Guimaraes and Collins 2018: 229](#)).

In the University of Sussex Library's case, we reclassified and merged two classmark sections together. Goddard and Haillay ([2017:21, 25](#)) have explained that when the library was set up in the 1960s, although the Library of Congress scheme was used, there was much deviation, and correction is now taking place to conform to a recognised cataloguing standard. Using external sources such as Classification Web ([Goddard and Haillay, 2017:22](#)) to create classmarks can prove invaluable. As many classmark ranges need to be corrected, this will take many years. Webster and Faulkner recommend ([2022:106, 109](#)) that a spreadsheet of affected books should be created to facilitate the creation of the new classmarks. At the same time, good practice suggests any catalogue record can be updated ([Webster and Faulkner, 2022:106](#)) using WorldCat to improve discovery.

As Spalding ([2011:42](#)) suggests, before commencing with any move, communication to both staff and library users is vital. Using understandable terminology wherever

possible, notices and other relevant communications should be used, referring users to ask staff if they have any questions.

Reviewing the literature reveals a contentious area: access to items being moved. If the move is small, and staff can readily access the stock, Weaver and Stanning (2002:68) suggest books can be collected by a member of library staff. Meltzer (1993:559) goes further and suggests that to maintain a reliable service, collections should take place at specific times.

Cash (2001:24) recognises that the longer and larger the move, the more difficult and frustrating it becomes to maintain an on-going collection.

Atkins and Teper (2011:62, 70) and Cash (2001:23) have stressed the importance of keeping books in order. Adequate space must be made available for books to be stored in their new or temporary location, and if moving to a permanent location, space must be allocated for growth (Lambert, 2022:171). Many authors (Cash, 2001:20-21; Lambert, 2022:173) suggest measuring exact lengths to identify where specific books will sit or establishing waypoints to identify an immediate area (Lindsay, 2017:50; Lambert 2022:169). Cash (2001:21) identifies human error as a potential problem: humans may continually overshelve by an inch (25mm) leading to a cumulative loss of space. Lindsay (2017:53-54) recommends leaving space for interfiling returned items and cleaning the shelves. Cash (2001:22), further suggests it is good practice to avoid inconvenient classmark breaks. However, as Spalding (2011:42-43) outlines, book moving can be physically demanding, and so setting achievable targets is essential.

The use of planning apps, or at least a Gantt chart, should be considered. Goddard and Haillay (2017:25), while rectifying previous librarians' decisions, have identified a suitable order for reclassifying books to ensure the number of times books are moved is reduced. They further recommend (2017:22) that any movement of books relating to reclassification should not start until the allocation of new classmarks for a particular section has been completed.

Many authors consider the various contributions of staff. Goddard and Haillay (2017:24) identify there should be a clear line of management, supervision, and support. Spalding (2011:43) supports this idea, and further suggests that there is a need to set targets to maintain momentum, and that staff should have suitable areas to work. Guimaraes and Collins (2018:231) observe that for keeping staff up to date with progress, targets, and other essential information such as changes to procedures, regular stand-up scrums or meetings are essential. There is a need to consider whether the identified work should be undertaken by specific library or temporary staff. Goddard and Haillay (2017:22-24) suggest allocating new classmarks to books should be done by trained cataloguing staff, while the practical changing classmarks on the library's management system, putting new labels on, and book moving could be done by temporary staff after training. Goddard and Haillay (2017:24) further recognise that once staff are familiar with the processes, they speed up.

Guimaraes and Collins (2018:231) highlight a possible problem when undertaking the practical process of reclassifying of a book. For whatever reason, there will be books which do not appear on the spreadsheet or do not have a matching bibliographic record. These need to be sent to a cataloguer for processing. Facilities, such as trolleys, should be made available in the workspace.

Cash (2001:25) recommends ensuring the equipment you intend to use is adequate. If you are using trolleys to move books, are they appropriate, and do you have enough? Spalding (2011:42) further underlines the importance of possessing enough spine labels for relabelling each book and Guimaraes and Collins (2018:230) recommend ensuring there are also enough computers, label printers and other miscellaneous accessories.

It is unusual for projects to run without issue and there will often be delays due to unforeseen complications (Meltzer: 1993:560), as Atkins and Teper (2011:62) suggest lift breakdowns are one possible cause of significant delays if you are moving books to other floors. The management and planning of any book moving project needs to be flexible and allow for midstream adjustments if necessary (Webster and Faulkner, 2022:110).

Writing in 2011, Atkins and Teper (2011:61) suggest there is limited literature in this area. Further research is required here.

## Methodology

In June and July of 2023, we undertook a reclassification of our English Literature collection. This involved 25,000 books classed as PF under the University of Sussex classification system (UoS) which needed to be merged with 10,000 books classed as PR under the Library of Congress classification system (LC).

To achieve this, we broke the project down into the following steps:

- Stage 1. Reclassify the books in PF
- Stage 2. Preparation for the project
- Stage 3. Move the PR books (temporary staff start)
- Stage 4. Flip the classmarks of the PF→PR books and interfile with PR books
- Stage 5. Move PG-PQ round to combine the space for the new PR
- Stage 6. Return the new PR books to the open shelves (temporary staff end)
- Stage 7. Check and fix any snagging issues

### Stage 1: Reclassifying the books in PF

All books in the PF classmark had to be reclassified to LC. The majority were reclassified to PR (PF→PR); however, a small number of books (less than 1000) were reclassified to other classmark's (PF→Other).

To do the reclassification, a list of all the books in PF was created on ALMA, the Library's management system. All the books on this list were given a new LC classmark by colleagues in Cataloguing, the records were updated but the new classmark was not shared publicly. Two new lists were then created. A list of PF→PR; and a list of PF→Other. These lists were then passed to the Collection Services.

Collection Services combined the list of PF→PR with the list of books already in PR, colour coding the two types of books. The list was then organised into PR classmark order. This allowed us to see where large amounts of space would be needed for PF→PR to be interfiled, once the classmarks had been flipped.

## **Stage 2: Preparation for the Project**

Two small tests of the workflow were undertaken as part of the planning stage. These involved the PF→Other books, and a small selection of PF→PR books (Irish, Scottish, and Welsh literature). We were testing the moving, merging, and flipping of the books, to get a better understanding of the resources and manpower we would require. Library staff conducted these tests of workflow.

Once the workflow had been tested, we needed to measure the length of the shelves in PR and in PF to determine the space needed for the merger. To do this, we respaced PF and PR so that the shelves had an equal length of books on them. We multiplied this number by the number of shelves, which gave us the meterage. The meterage was used to inform the amount of shelving we would need in stage 3-4. This also meant that we could set accurate targets for the workers during the project.

We also had to look at several key factors of the project before stages 3-6. Those questions included (1) who was going to do the work, (2) where would the work be done, and (3) what equipment and software would be needed.

1. Who would be doing the work was debated extensively. An early proposal recommended a larger involvement of Library staff; however, we ultimately decided to use temporary staff to work on the project. This was decided based on factors such as disruption to Library workflow, budgetary constraints, and effectiveness of using temporary staff over Library staff.

There was already a precedent in place for hiring temporary staff for summer projects, and a similar method was applied to this project. Hiring of the temporary staff members began in April 2023. Applicants were invited to apply by email which included information of the summer project's start date and a brief description of the type of work. They were informed that they needed to send in a CV to be considered. A few former temporary staff also contacted us asking for summer employment and we were happy to accept their applications. Hiring was done at the discretion of the Collection Services Librarian and the Shelving Supervisor. We were looking for trustworthy individuals with the ability to work unsupervised in small groups who would be committed to the project. In the end we had ten staff

members, with one replacing another in the middle of the project, and one who worked part time. A third-party agency was used to facilitate the hiring process for the temporary staff.

2. It was determined before the project began that a space would be needed to store the books once they had been reclassified, and before they went back onto the open shelves. The original area identified was a recently renovated rolling stack bookstore, known as the BLDS Basement named after the British Library of Development Studies. The BLDS Basement needed to be prepared in the weeks leading up to the start of the project; a large book move commenced to consolidate the space available as it was being used as a transitional journal store. Once the book move was completed, we measured the space available in metres and compare that to the meterage of PF. From this it was determined that the BLDS Basement alone would not be large enough. Fortunately, a second location was found within the Library's North Basement (for those unfamiliar with the University of Sussex Library, the North Basement is on a different floor to the BLDS Basement). Neither basement was large enough on its own to store the books being reclassified.

A space was also required to do the reclassification. There was no suitable location within Library staff areas, so a study space was requisitioned for the duration of the project. The room we settled on was deemed suitable as it had the necessary computers. It was also adjacent to the BLDS Basement where most of the books would be stored, and within a few metres of the lift to the North Basement where the remaining books were stored. Furthermore, the area could be closed off from the main Library without causing any major disruption to the students, which meant that the workers had a quiet space for their use. This allowed us a certain amount of flexibility and leeway in our actions as we could



**Figure 3:** A workstation with equipment

contain any chaos within designated workstations (see [Figure 3](#)) and there was never a risk of us getting in the way of the wider Library.

3. There were several pieces of equipment and software that needed to be acquired before the start of the project. Two of the key pieces of physical equipment required were P-touch labelling machines, and barcode scanners. We had two P-touch labelling machines already; however, we required more so two extras were purchased. These were slightly updated versions, but they worked on the same software. Barcode scanners we had in abundance, however many of them had to be reprogrammed so that they would function in the necessary way.

The move was always planned to take place during the summer holidays. This was the usual time for us, Collections Services, to run large projects as to limit disruption to the Library users. This was especially important as the Library remained open for the duration of the project.

### Stage 3: Move the PR books into the basement.

The temporary staff arrived to help from this stage of the project. The first stage they were involved in was moving the 10,000 PR books from the open Library shelves to the BLDS Basement and the North Basement. For ease we had two teams working at either end of the classmark, moving towards each other. This approach was taken as space was limited in both basements predominantly because they both use rolling stacks. By having two teams we increased the speed at which the books were moved.

Gap-identifiers (see [Figure 4](#)) had been placed periodically in the shelves to signpost where space (multiple shelves) would need to left empty for PF books to be slotted in, this was done using the spreadsheet of PF→PR.



Figure 4: Gap identifiers



#### Stage 4: Flip the classmarks of the PF→PR books and interfile with PR books

Once they had finished moving the PR books off the open shelves and into the two basements, we began flipping the classmarks. This was the most labour-intensive part of the project, and we had estimated it would take 8 weeks to complete.

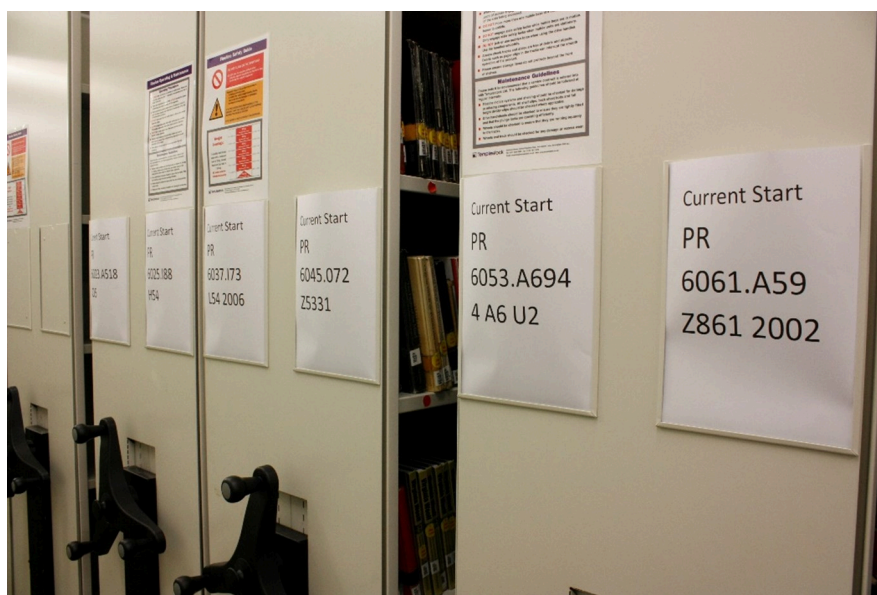
The temporary workers would remove a trolley of books from the shelves in PF classmark order, flip the classmarks, relabel the books and then place them on a new trolley in PR classmark order. Once all the books on a trolley had been processed, they would be shelved in the basements in new classmark order (see [Figure 5](#) and [7](#)). Range guides were placed on both basement doors to indicate the range of PR which were stored there. We also placed range guides as shelving aids (see [Figure 6](#)) on the end of each row of the rolling stack.

Books which couldn't be processed correctly, were placed on the 'trolley of shame' to be processed by a specially trained temporary staff member (who worked part time and was paid at a higher grade), or to be passed back to the cataloguing team. All temporary staff members were trained in a few common errors to stop a backlog occurring. These books once processed would then be shelved in the basements in new classmark order.

A collection service also operated during this period. Any student who wished to borrow a PR book were directed to the Library Service Desk, where a staff member would add the details of their request to the list. The list was checked twice a day by collections staff who would collect the books from the necessary store and place a request on them for the students. The students would then receive an email stating that they could collect the book from the Library during opening hours. The books in PF remained available to users on the open shelves for the duration of the project.



**Figure 5:** Books waiting to be shelved



**Figure 6:** Shelving aids

### **Stage 5: Move PG-PQ round to combine the space for the new PR**

Before we could move the new PR books back onto the open shelves, all the books between PF and PR had to be moved round and squidged up, to create enough space in the correct location. Therefore, a week before the end of the flipping several workers were reassigned to moving books. The move of books was planned to take a period of 2 weeks, a timeframe we based on several previous book moves we had conducted. Once all the temporary workers had been reassigned, they were staggered strategically throughout the shelves to ensure that they were not on top of each other.

We also took this opportunity to clean the empty shelves prior to the book move.

### **Stage 6: Return the new PR books to the open shelves (temporary staff leave)**

The move of PR books out from the BLDS and North basements was planned to take less than a week, as all the books were in the correct order. The temporary workers filled trolleys with shelves of books, the trolleys were numbered, and other temporary workers would then shelve them. This was done in two teams with one team working from the BLDS Basement going forward, and the other team working from the North Basement going backwards.

### **Stage 7: Check and fix any snagging issues**

When the move was finished (end of July) the temporary staff's contracts ended. After this we planned to check for any snagging issues. This was done with a series of shelf checks looking specifically for any shelving or labelling errors. We also added new range guides.

A smaller reclassification took place after the project, these were German Literature books in PJ-PK which had to be reclassified to PF. This was undertaken by the Library's shelving team in September. To prevent a further move later the PJ-PK books were



**Figure 7:** Temporary workers shelving

moved to their new location before being flipped and relabelled. This meant that the sequence went, PE, PJ, PK, PG for several months, but as there were few students around during the summer, this was deemed an acceptable disruption.

## **Discussion**

Preparation for this reclassification project started before Covid with the intention of undertaking the work in 2020, this was delayed, and the project took place in the summer of 2023. This is a two-section project: classmarks are assigned by the Cataloguing Section (a sub-section of Content Delivery), and the more practical elements, such as moving books, flipping classmarks, and spine labelling by Collection

Services (a sub-section of Collections). It is important to note that, although the project only took eight weeks to complete, the reclassification process took much longer. Several years to create new LC classmarks for every book and add them to the records. This was primarily because this was done in-house. It is possible to farm this work out, but this would have been at a high financial cost and there are always local variations to the LC classmark. The successful collaboration between the Collection Services team and the Cataloguing team was a triumph of the project. It was particularly helpful that one member of the reclassification team project team, the Shelving Supervisor, is a member of both teams.

After reviewing the literature, and using the library's past experience of previous projects, we decided to start removing books at the beginning of Classmark PF and work through in classmark order. This ensured every book on the shelves were reviewed and re-classified, and any items not reclassified, such as those on loan or missing at the end of the project had a Work Order placed on them. We did not recall any items. We thought about picking books off in the new PR order, but we felt this system would be more time-consuming and potentially leave significant items to process at the end of the project.

Communication was top of our priorities. Library users were informed what was happening and why, and the expected timescales were communicated using the Library's normal communication channels. The temporary staff were fully briefed about the project in case they were asked by Library users when collecting books. In addition, the managers of the project met regularly (a stand-up scrum) with the temporary staff at least once a week to update them on progress, and the managers welcomed their feedback and ideas.

The PF book spreadsheet used was produced in 2018, primarily for re-classification purposes. It did not contain any books purchased after this date as the new classification would have been added to the record during the initial classification process. For reclassification purposes, this did not matter as we were not working directly from the spreadsheet. Allowances were made in the spacing for these additional books.

Prior to the reclassification project starting, two small workflow tests were undertaken. These ensured our processes, workflows, suggested timings and training documents were satisfactory. We used a selection of library staff who had not been involved in any earlier library reclassification activity as testers.

We were able to undertake the main project during the University's Summer Vacation, when demands on books and Library resources are reduced. After the first week, all PR books were only accessible via a collection service, while the PFs were accessible on the main shelves until they were taken for reclassification, after which they were only available via the collection services. Items were retrieved twice a day,

and then available via the library's request system. If books were required urgently, retrieval was done on demand. This worked well.

The project got off to a slow start, as the BLDS Basement where some of the items were to be stored was initially unavailable due to the overrunning of an earlier project. This caused the initial transfer of PR books to be delayed. Likewise using temporary staff who had to be registered with the University's IT service to allow access to the Library Management System took a day or two longer to complete. In hindsight, it would have been better to have registered staff earlier (the previous week); however, as the logins had to be collected in person, this was not possible. This was the first-time summer temporary staff had required IT accounts.

The current PR books were moved first. Using the spreadsheet, gap-identifiers were placed in the PR sequence where significant space was required for re-classified PR books. In many cases, large gaps were required, some more than twenty shelves. We allowed for twenty-five books on each shelf, this included an allowance of three books for recent purchases. In the basements, shelves had waypoint notices attached to every three bays, and the PR books subsequently were moved. As there were two different locations for storing reclassified books, there had to be a break in the sequence, and this was set at PR 6023.A518 O3. A more suitable classmark would have been at the change in a whole number, such as PR 6023 or PR 6024. This could have been used but these were several shelves away. The move of PR went well.

The temporary staff were formed into five groups of two. Anticipated reclassification targets were given (eight trolley shelves a day per team, 7.2m or 330 books a day), and a rota for reshelving reclassified books. Each team collected books, reclassified them, and put them on a trolley in classmark order; these trollies were then numbered for reshelving, and the books then reshelved by the rota. As some sections had many books by the same author, such as Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare, we anticipated shelving in trolley order would ensure works by the same author would be re-shelved at the same time. It did and this helped space management. However, there were space issues. Although we had placed waypoint notices every three bays, re-shelvers placed books close together rather than spreading them out over the three bays. Initially this required additional book moving to take place to ensure there was adequate space. Being flexible, waypoint signs were then put on each bay. Shelving was awkward: not only were there two locations, but locations had rolling stacks which meant there was a limited amount of space, as aisles could only be used one at a time and only two members of staff could fit down an aisle. As expected, the lift broke down, and we switched to the pre-planned longer route to the basement. This delayed some books being reshelved at the end of the project.

The flipping of classmarks and relabelling went largely without problems. Initially, some barcode scanners did not work and there were some issues with spine-labeller software settings. As anticipated, very soon after starting, the staff became very familiar with all the process and sped up.

A 'trolley of shame' was used from the start. All temporary staff were trained on resolving minor issues, and if this was not possible, they were placed on the trolley-of-shame, named by a member of the project staff. A member of the library's shelving team was additionally trained to triage additional problems, such as books recorded as missing, withdrawn, or books which had not been allocated a new classification number. Liaison between this member of staff and the Shelving Supervisor was paramount and between them they were able to resolve 90% of the problems, without referring to the Cataloguing Section which sped up the process. This member of staff was paid at a higher grade.

We were concerned about staff motivation as we recognised the job was potentially tedious and repetitive. During the summer, the Library and University has various staff activities which we ensured they could take part in. For example, the library had various socials (coffee or lunchtime events which included cake), while the University held their Professional Services Day, which included talks, presentations, and a free lunch. Towards the end of the project, and before the re-classified books were returned, all the shelves were cleaned. One Friday afternoon, at 1pm, each group was allocated a section of shelves to clean. Once done, they could go home early: you've never seen such fast cleaning!

The team we had was excellent and we had complete trust in them to know what they were doing and mature enough to carry on without supervision.

### **Future Reclassifications**

Although the library's Literature collections have now been reclassified to the LC scheme, there is still much reclassification to be completed. Currently, we are reclassifying QD (Sussex's bespoke Mathematics' classification to LC QA) and the reclassification flip is likely to take place in summer 2025. We are then looking well ahead to reclassify the whole of H and J classmarks: Politics, Economics and Sociology etc.; in excess of 100,000 items.

Even though this project was wrestling with the legacy of questionable decisions, by some of our early librarians, it has felt hugely rewarding to correct some long-standing issues.

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